HEPATITIS C

What is it?

Hepatitis C is an inflammation of the liver caused by a virus. It is different from Hepatitis A and B.

What are the symptoms?

Most people will have no symptoms at all. Some people can feel tired, sick and have abdominal pain. A few may have jaundice - yellow skin and eyes with dark-coloured urine with pale stools. In 80% of people the infection may continue for many years after the symptoms have disappeared. This can gradually cause more serious long-term damage to the liver, such as cirrhosis or liver cancer.

Is it infectious?

Yes. It is transmitted mainly through blood contact (e.g. when infected blood passes to another through cuts or damaged skin or by sharing equipment for injecting drugs). It is rarely passed on from an infected mother to her child, or through sexual contact. Hepatitis C is less common in Britain than in other parts of the world. The infection is not passed on through everyday activities such as coughing, sneezing, shaking hands or sharing food, crockery, bathrooms or toilets.

What is the incubation period?

It can be anything between 2 weeks and six months, most commonly 6-9 weeks.

Can it be prevented?

Yes. Injecting drug users should not share needles and syringes or ‘works’. People should have cuts covered when they are clearing up any spillages of blood or other body fluids. Blood donors are screened for the virus. Sterile needles should be used for all injections. No vaccine is available.

Is there any treatment?

Many people with hepatitis C infection will not benefit from treatment. Some patients may be given alpha interferon or ribaviran. However only 40% of people will respond to treatment in the long term. A person with hepatitis C infection will be referred to a specialist who will decide whether treatment should be given.

How soon can you return to work or school?

Hepatitis C is not infectious in normal school or work conditions. People can return to work as soon as they feel well.